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Sherman Cochran and Andrew Hsieh, *The Lius of Shanghai*

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Kai Yiu Chan（陳計堯）*

The history of the Chinese family has long attracted scholarly attention in the study of Chinese society. Numerous attempts have been made to theorize the workings of the Chinese family through the study of household finance, inheritance, and rituals. Not only has patriarchal authority been examined and theorized, but also the role of maternal kin or the extended family, as well as the lineage. Yet many of these studies rest on a stereotype of patriarchal authority and male dominance over family decisions regarding the future of the children. This new study, *The Lius of Shanghai*, co-authored by Sherman Cochran and Andrew Hsieh, is an important effort to challenge that stereotype.

The book offers a detailed study of a Ningbo business giant and his family. The main characters are Liu Hongsheng, a well-known Shanghai-born entrepreneur who built a business empire in Republican Shanghai, his wife Ye Suzhen, a Ningbo native, and their twelve children. Cochran and Hsieh highlight how the members of the Liu family—as least as so defined—interacted, negotiated, persuaded one another, and made decisions, and thus providing us with an interesting and insightful story that uncovers many aspects of the Chinese family. Most of the family members are discussed in detail, at least for a particular

* Department of History, National Cheng Kung University

moment or particular issue. Cochran and Hsieh discuss “parents who dreamed of a business dynasty,” sons who studied in the UK, four children who defied their parents’ plans (by dropping out of a renowned American university, by bad health, by getting married “to a westernized woman,” and by having an affair and later producing a child with a married man), a son who turned to communism, a son who suffered from psychological problems while studying abroad and who also “refused to return to China” but was tricked into returning after the Communist takeover in 1949, and a daughter who knew well how to build family alliances. In these chapters, the book also discusses the decisions of the parents or the “family”, including their own marriage, at certain particular moments such as the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Communist takeover in 1949.

This book is not, however, a comprehensive work on the life history of all the immediate family members of Liu Hongsheng. Not all members, as the authors admit, receive equal coverage. Some receive only a few lines of description (“the fifth and ninth sons and the middle daughter”) but a few others, particularly the eighth son, receive two chapters of attention. Although this is explained by the authors as a result of the limitation of the historical sources, it also means that this book aims at something other than a complete picture of the family.

Through studying the bilateral and multilateral communications among members of the Liu family members, the book delineates the internal dynamics of a Chinese family. Especially important were various negotiations among members of the family. These negotiations reverse the popular image of Chinese patriarchal authority over children. Family decisions were made by the family collectively, parents and children, and although parents had their original plans, children fought or negotiated to adjust these plans. As such, the Chinese family was not the story of the male line of descendants but that of all the offspring of the couple.

The Lius of Shanghai successfully articulates the internal dynamics of the Chinese family, particularly the negotiation process and its power over family decision-making, based on the historical materials available at the Archives of the Lieu Ong Kee Accounts Office in the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. The Accounts Office was the core institution of Liu Hongsheng's business life, and it also became the hub of correspondence among members of the Lius family, regardless of whether they were business-related or not. These documents, together with other business-oriented documents related to Liu Hongsheng, constitute an important scholarly treasure for the study of modern Chinese business. This book, however, uses these documents to analyze the social history of the family of the business founder. Through this novel perspective on so-called business documents, the authors clearly demonstrate the need for researchers to explore the numerous layers and dimensions of the history of a business family beyond business history.

Moreover, *The Lius of Shanghai* not only provides a detailed analysis of the internal dynamics of a Chinese family but also includes extensive quotations from the archival sources. To the few who had the privilege to read those documents, whether the Lius themselves or later scholars, these quotations probably help them to recall many of the historical memories related to these documents. To the less privileged general readers, these quotations certainly bring the historical figures closer.

In this book, the authors have neatly presented a story of Chinese family negotiation processes that took place among Liu Hongsheng, his wife, and their offspring. Nonetheless, through the additional information given by the book, it is hard for the readers to accept the analyses without reservation. For example, the stories of Liu Hongsheng's children with his mistresses are basically ignored.

Therefore, how to draw the family boundary naturally emerges as an important question. To the children of Liu Hongsheng and Ye Suzhen, they and their parents were family, while Liu's mistresses and their children were not. Equally problematic here is the question of the extended family of the Lius, in particular maternal kinship. Although Ye Suzhen's family background is discussed in an early chapter, the whole Ye family as Arnold Wright suggested in the early twentieth century is almost entirely missing here. Nor can one find cross-generational relationships, especially between Hongsheng's mother and his eldest children.

Lack of sources may have prevented the authors from considering these questions, but *The Lius of Shanghai* neglects another important piece of the puzzle for which there is much material in the archives: Liu Jisheng (Jackson Lieu). Although he appears in passing in this book, his role in the Liu family seems to be underestimated. As a junior partner of Hongsheng in the comprador business since the 1910s, Jisheng served as his brother's deputy and peer, especially in Hongsheng's absence in the prewar years, such as in the crucial year of 1927. In some of the correspondence between Hongsheng and his sons, the junior Lius reminded their father to maintain a close relationship with their uncle. How did the family of Liu Hongsheng as articulated in this book interact with Jisheng? As "brothers in business" for more than two decades before 1937, Hongsheng and Jisheng had a relationship which, particularly in relation to their parents and offspring, was of considerable importance which may provide another dimension of the so-called internal dynamics of the family.

Moreover, as some members of this family (especially the mother) were illiterate, the production of the family correspondence clearly involved other people who acted as scribes. Insofar as these secretarial personnel had access to

the in-house stories of Liu's business empire, one wonders to what extent these non-kin members of the household were regarded as people as close as family and how these secretarial personnel polished their employers' prose to smooth communication, discussion, and the exchange of opinions and ideas. Obviously, the question of agency in family negotiations is as important as that in business history.

The question of agency can also be extended to the role of historians themselves in the making of history. What presuppositions go into the definition of family, determining who is regarded as a member of the Liu family and who is not? By focusing on only the parents and their children, the authors seem to have adopted the model of the nuclear family, very much in tune with modern Western countries. Yet the authors also produced a diagram of "The Liu Family Tree" which shows not only the siblings of Hongsheng's generation but also the children of his mistresses. Such a factual description of the Liu family certainly defies the scope of the family as Ye Suzhen's children would have described it. There thus exists a discrepancy between the family as perceived by the members of at least one branch of the family, and the family as constructed by the historians in this regard. How to understand these different Liu families remains a crucial question, while how to interpret their family history is an equally important matter for understanding the history of the Chinese family.

Despite the questions discussed above in this limited space, *The Lius of Shanghai* enlightens the field of the study of the Chinese family history through the study of this particular family's correspondence. It equally opens up further debate on the history of the Chinese family.